Hegseth's Christian rhetoric draws renewed scrutiny during Iran war | AP News

Tiffany Stanley

WASHINGTON (AP) — Since becoming defense secretary, Pete Hegseth has found no shortage of ways to bring his strand of conservative evangelicalism into the Pentagon.

He hosts monthly Christian worship services for employees. His department's promotional videos have displayed Bible verses alongside military footage. In speeches and interviews, he often argues the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation and troops should embrace God, potentially risking the military's secular mission and hard-won pluralism.

Now the defense secretary's Christian rhetoric has taken on new meaning after the U.S. and Israel went to war with Iran, an Islamic theocracy.

"The mullahs are desperate and scrambling," he said at a recent Pentagon press briefing, referring to Iran's Shiite Muslim clerics. He later recited Psalm 144, a passage of Scripture that Jews and Christians share: "Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle."

Hegseth has a history of defending the Crusades, the brutal medieval wars that pitted Christians against Muslims. In his 2020 book "American Crusade," he wrote that those who enjoy Western civilization should "thank a crusader." Two of his tattoos draw from crusader imagery: the Jerusalem Cross and the phrase "Deus Vult," or "God wills it," which Hegseth has called "the rallying cry of Christian knights as they marched to Jerusalem."

Matthew D. Taylor, a visiting scholar at Georgetown who studies religious extremism and has been a frequent Hegseth critic, said, "The U.S. voluntarily going to war against a Muslim country with the military under the leadership of Pete Hegseth is exactly the kind of scenario that people like me were warning about before the election and throughout his appointment process."

Taylor said Hegseth's rhetoric and leadership "can only inflame and reinforce the fears and deep animosity that the regime in Iran has towards the U.S."

When asked whether Hegseth views the war in Iran in religious terms, a Defense Department spokesperson pointed to a recent CBS interview in which Hegseth seemed to confirm as much.

“We’re fighting religious fanatics who seek a nuclear capability in order for some religious Armageddon,” Hegseth said of Iranian leaders. “But from my perspective, I mean, obviously I’m a man of faith who encourages our troops to lean into their faith, rely on God.”

Allegations US military commanders cited biblical prophecies remain unverified

Generations of evangelicals have been influenced by their own version of Armageddon and the end of the world, circulated by books like the “Left Behind” series and “The Late Great Planet Earth,” or the horror film “A Thief in the Night.” Some evangelicals espouse prophecies in which warfare involving Israel is key to bringing about the return of Jesus.

Christian Zionist pastor John Hagee, head of Christians United for Israel, said of the Iran war, “Prophetically, we’re right on cue.”

The co-founder of Hegseth’s denomination, however, does not teach this theology. Pastor Doug Wilson of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches identifies as a postmillennialist, meaning he believes most of the apocalyptic events of the Bible have already happened, paving the way for the gradual Christianization of the world before Christ’s return.

Hegseth has not said the Iran war is part of Christian prophecy. Yet days after the conflict began, claims went viral that U.S. military commanders were telling troops the war fulfilled biblical prophecies around Armageddon and the return of Christ.

The Associated Press has not been able to verify these claims, which stem from one source: Mikey Weinstein, the head of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a watchdog group. Based on allegations Weinstein said he received from hundreds of troops, 30 Democratic members of Congress asked the Pentagon inspector general to investigate.

In an interview with the AP, Weinstein declined to provide documentation or the original emails he received from service members. He said troops were afraid of retaliation, so they would not speak to the media, even if their identities remained protected.

Three major religion watchdog groups — the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Anti-Defamation League and the Council on American-Islamic Relations — said they have not received similar complaints. The Pentagon declined to comment on the allegations.

Hegseth wants to reform the military chaplain corps

Hegseth’s church network, the CREC, preaches a patriarchal form of Christianity, where women cannot serve in leadership, and pastors argue that homosexuality should be criminalized. Hegseth last year reposted a video in which a CREC pastor opposed women’s right to vote. Wilson, its most prominent leader, identifies as a Christian nationalist and preached at the Pentagon in February at Hegseth’s invitation.

Both Wilson and Hegseth have questioned Muslim immigration to the United States. Wilson argues the country should restrict Muslim immigration in order to remain predominantly Christian. In “American Crusade,” Hegseth lamented growing Muslim birth rates and that Muhammad was a popular boys’ name in the U.S.

As head of the armed forces, Hegseth has overseen changes that are in line with his conservative Christian worldview, including banning transgender troops, curtailing diversity initiatives and reviewing women in combat roles.

Youssef Chouhoud, a political scientist at Christopher Newport University, said, “The intrusion of Christian nationalist policy, not just Christian nationalist rhetoric … that is what’s troubling.”

Hegseth has pledged to reform the military’s chaplain corps, which provides spiritual care to troops of any faith and no faith at all. He scrapped the 2025 U.S. Army Spiritual Fitness Guide and wants to renew chaplains’ religious focus, which he said in a December video message has been minimized “in an atmosphere of political correctness and secular humanism.”

Rabbi Laurence Bazer, a retired U.S. Army colonel and chaplain, said it risks making service members feel like outsiders when the language of military leadership draws exclusively from one faith tradition.

“The U.S. military reflects the full diversity of this country — people of every faith step forward to serve,” Bazer said in a statement. “That diversity is a strength worth protecting.”

___

AP reporter Konstantin Toropin contributed to this report. AP reporter Peter Smith contributed from Pittsburgh.

___

Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP’s collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.